

# Waste Minimization, Segregation and Recycling in Hospitals

There isn't a healthcare organization anywhere that does not strive to improve patient satisfaction; delivery of care; performance as a corporate citizen; and the bottom line. Even the best endowed among nationally prominent health care providers have sought to soften the blow of decreasing Federal dollars.

Everyone is asked to look for a way to cut potential costs within the hospital environment. Here are several strategies that can not only save facilities thousands of dollars, they also significantly lessen hospitals' impact on the environment and community around them.

In 1996, Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City implemented an aggressive waste minimization plan that sought to minimize both the volume and the toxicity of the waste their facility generated. As a result, they continue to save over \$600,000 a year. Here are some beginning steps any health care organization can take to minimize waste.

## 1. Establish a "Green Team."

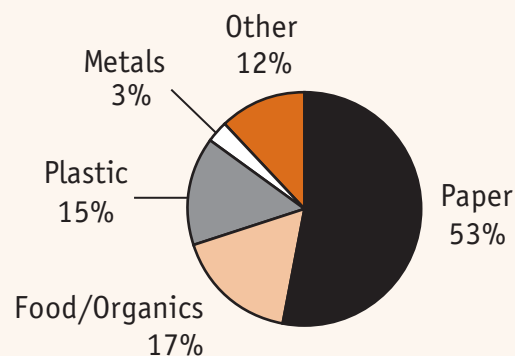
Convene a task force of administrators, housekeepers, nurses and others who are responsible for waste handling. You can add your directors of purchasing and environmen-

tal services, someone from the product selection/safety team, risk managers, safety managers, director of nursing, and interested employees and staff. This group can then strategize about courses of action for the facility with input from all responsible sectors.

2. **Conduct a waste audit.** It doesn't have to be done by a consultant, it can be handled by a nurse or an employee from environmental services. Take a good look at everything that is coming into your hospital (through the Purchasing /Materials Management Department) to everything that exits the hospital—in the form of recyclables, red bag waste, solid waste, food waste, laboratory chemicals, chemotherapeutic and pathological waste. You may be surprised to find that about 85% of the waste that exits the hospital is non-infectious waste similar to that you'd find in a large hotel or office building. The chart bellows illustrates the composition of hospital waste.

3. **Waste segregation** is an important step in reducing the volume of waste, because it offers the ability to make more accurate assessments about the composition of the hospital's waste, and positions the facility for different management

**Hospital Solid Waste Composition**



strategies.<sup>1</sup> Use the results from the waste audit to identify wasteful practices and design a waste management strategy that incorporates waste reduction, reuse, and recycling measures.

4. **Education is a top priority.** Teach nursing and housekeeping staff the proper way to segregate waste. Train staff about the environmental consequences of medical waste incineration. Post signs where waste is sorted.
5. **Recycling.** Don't throw out what you can recycle. Make recycling a priority. There are more than 25 materials in a hospital that can be safely and easily recycled. Cardboard, glass, office paper, drink cans, newspapers, magazines, and PETE #1 and HPDE #2 plastic have nationwide recycling markets. Set aside space for bins and work with your waste hauler to expand the scope of your recycling contracts.
6. **Purchasing practices** are key in pursuing aggressive waste minimization. Work with your purchasing team to select reusable rather than disposable products. Have your product selection team examine the environmental impacts/safety of materials coming into the hospital. Work with your risk manager to choose products that don't have a negative impact on worker or patient health and safety. Implement a purchasing program that favors products made of recycled paper that has not been bleached with chlorine. Communicate with suppliers about the need for totally recyclable or reusable packaging materials.

With a careful examination of the current system, implementation of an education and recycling-based program, hospitals can indeed reduce their waste and save money at the same time. Participating in waste reduction programs will help your facility lead the way in providing the best patient care with concern for the safety and well-being of your employees, patients, visitors and the communities you work in and serve.

## Notes

1. Shaner, H. et al. (1993) *An Ounce of Prevention: Waste Reduction Strategies for Health Care Facilities*. American Society for Healthcare Environmental Services. Chicago, IL.



1755 S Street, NW  
Suite 6B  
Washington, DC 20009  
Phone: 202.234.0091  
Fax: 202.234.9121  
[www.noharm.org](http://www.noharm.org)  
[info@hcwh.org](mailto:info@hcwh.org)

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